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Review:

The “Estranged” Generation? Social and Generational Change in Interwar British Jewry, David Dee
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The “Estranged” Generation? Social and Generational Change in Interwar British Jewry, David Dee (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), ISBN 978-1-349-95237-3, pp. 377, £80.

David Dee’s new book, *The “Estranged” Generation? Social and Generational Change in Interwar British Jewry*, challenges the notion of contemporary observers that the children of immigrants – both foreign and British-born – were estranged from their Jewish heritage (p. 3). Given this perception, it is not surprising that community leaders were concerned about this generation and its “attitude towards its Jewishness and Jewish peers” (p. 5). For many, the children of immigrants constituted a group who were “distinct from immigrant and native Jewry” and “collectively undermining the community’s social, communal, religious and cultural health and cohesion” (p. 5). Dee asks whether this image of the second generation, seen as “drifting away from the culture and authority of their elders within both immigrant and native Jewry”, accurately characterized second-generation attitudes and behaviours (p. 6). He suggests that the generational distinctions seemed greater than they actually were (p. 46).

Dee’s well written and richly documented book builds on a number of earlier studies, many of which were broader in scope. His more concentrated focus allows him to offer a detailed assessment of second-generation Jews in Britain, primarily during the 1920s and 1930s. Dee’s chapters on “Home and Family”, “Education and Work”, “Religion”, “Politics”, and “Sport and Recreation” provide an insight into the choices many Jews could and did make, the forces that offered them new options, and the consequences of the choices individuals and families made.

The author’s extensive use of interviews, memoirs, and autobiographical materials has enabled him to delve into the experiences and attitudes of this pivotal generation. Dee contends that, for the most part, this generation was much less distant from their Judaism than many believed. While the second generation’s form of observance was rather different from that of their immigrant parents, observers’ worst fears “were simply unfounded” (p. 336). Yet, he also notes that many from the second generation were less religiously observant and experienced discord with the earlier generation (a common denominator in immigrant communities). His contention that previous scholars have paid little attention to generational change seems somewhat overstated.

There is, however, a tension in this analysis. Dee convincingly draws on sources that indicate that the Judaism of the second generation was not imperilled but he also acknowledges that the manner in which the second generation was "expressing its Jewishness was clearly shifting" and that this generation was indeed experiencing some measure of "estrangement" (p. 336). Arguably, assessing Jewishness depends in part on how one defines Judaism and Jewish observance. More traditionally observant Jews would probably challenge Dee's conclusion since, as he demonstrates, adherence to Jewish law clearly did diminish. Even so, many observers at the time would presumably have been relieved had they appreciated the extent to which many members of the second generation ultimately continued to feel connected to their heritage and appreciate the traditions their parents and grandparents observed.

Clearly, there were significant shifts. For example, many Jews moved into jobs and careers "that would have been simply unthinkable to a first-generation Jew arriving from the Continent in the 1880s, 1890s and 1900s" (p. 119). Certainly, many of the second generation "did not, or could not" break away from immigrant trades (p. 127) and antisemitism had an impact on one's choices about where to work or live (p. 62). While new employment options did not necessitate a movement away from Judaism, as Dee reminds us, they often led to friendships with non-Jews (p. 122) and offered income that enabled Jews to move to suburban communities and out of the tightly knit immigrant communities (pp. 55–6). Even so, Jews often moved to areas where other Jews already lived and regularly joined existing or built new synagogues there (p. 61). Hence, geographic mobility did not mean that the "community was split physically, demographically and culturally" (p. 59). Moreover, "moving to suburbs was not the exclusive preserve of", nor did it begin with, the "interwar second generation" (p. 59).

For some Jews, politics seemingly replaced religion (pp. 206–9). This too was not unique to the second generation who, to some degree, continued and extended "habits and practices" of the first generation (p. 213). Once in Britain, politics became attractive to larger numbers than had been the case among the immigrant generation. In addition to Labour, significant numbers of second-generation Jews supported Communism. Especially in the 1920s and 1930s, these Jews joined and provided important leadership within the Communist party (p. 222). Many members of the second generation believed that the established community offered inadequate resistance to fascism. As a result, younger Jews often supported

Communists because they considered them committed antifascists (pp. 231, 242). Jewish leadership within the Communist party declined in importance in the 1930s, decreasing with prosperity, geographic mobility, and post-1945 reports of Soviet antisemitism (p. 224). The many flavours of Zionism also attracted many second-generation Jews (p. 246).

As a number of earlier studies have also shown, interest in sport and leisure – activities often associated primarily with non-Jewish society and considered hedonistic by some – could increase “the sense of contemporary generational and social change” (p. 273). Many equated interest in sport with a rejection of immigrant traditions (pp. 275, 277, 281). Schools, clubs, and Britain’s enthusiasm for sport and leisure had a considerable impact on second-generation Jews (pp. 282, 286). Leisure activities of the immigrant generation such as friendly societies and the Workers’ Circle failed to attract large numbers of second-generation Jews (p. 287). Boxing, seen as a response to charges of Jewish “cowardice and effeminacy” and a Jewish propensity for gambling, continued to draw substantial interest during the interwar years (p. 292). As was the case among the British population more generally, cinema and dance became extremely popular and drew hundreds of young Jews to London’s West End (p. 299). Many of these activities were appealing not least because they offered unchaperoned time with the opposite sex (p. 300). Antisemitism often forced Jews to create their own parallel institutions in order to participate – in this respect, the experiences of British and American Jews were fairly similar (p. 313).

Dee notes that such participation may have changed perceptions of one’s Jewishness and Jewish peers. This did not, however, necessarily mean that second-generation Jews abandoned their sense of being Jewish (p. 315). While this challenges the notion of estrangement, the changes in practice and attitudes which Dee charts nevertheless point to a very different relationship to Judaism among many of the immigrants’ children (p. 316). For those committed to traditional Judaism, these changes were deeply disturbing. Dee is correct, however, to remind us that such changes in attitude were not the preserve of the generation who came of age in the 1920s and 30s (pp. 149, 154–5). Clearly, some felt genuine affection for Jewish tradition; others wanted to please their parents (p. 168). Yet, increasing numbers of young Jews did move away from an observant lifestyle. While there was little indication that intermarriage was on the rise (pp. 167–8), Judaism was increasingly less likely to govern the way the second generation lived (p. 184). That said, even of those

second-generation Jews who considered their elders’ observances “as undesirable and unhelpful reminders of their foreignness in a new land”, few converted (p. 188). Among those who remained more observant – and even those who drifted away – many would probably acknowledge that new styles of Jewish living were a significant departure from tradition and, depending on one’s definition, might no longer be perceived as Jewish – or Jewish enough.

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